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SUBJECT: Mosaic under pressure (part 2 of 2): Politicians Enter the fray in Quebec's debate over reasonable accommodation

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This message is Sensitive but Unclassified

Summary

¶11. (SBU) This is the second part of our examination of the debate over "reasonable accommodation," the political catch-all term for the building tension between Quebec's identity as a "secular" society and the perceived need to shape its rules and values to "accommodate" religious or cultural considerations. The debate has become more than a social and cultural phenomenon, and politicians across the ideological spectrum are positioning themselves vis-`-vis this issue, which is likely to remain important long after Quebec's March 26 election day. Mario Dumont, head of the Action Democratique du Quebec (ADQ), was the first to grab this political hot potato, with an open letter to the Quebec public that cited examples of "unreasonable accommodation." Premier Charest and the Quebec Liberal Party, and Andre Boisclair, head of the Parti Quebecois (PQ) soon followed suit with their own vision of what can be considered "reasonable" in Quebec's multicultural society.

"Reasonable" accommodation and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms

¶12. (SBU) In mid-February, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada took advantage of its planned conference on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms' 25th anniversary to organize a public forum on reasonable accommodation, which CBC Radio hosted and aired. The panel included Rabbi Ronnie Fine, Sarah Elgazzar, a Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations representative, journalist Laura-Julie Perreault, and Julius Grey, a constitutional lawyer and civil liberties advocate. Other religious leaders and PQ, ADQ, and Liberal party representatives participated and asked to defend their positions.

¶13. (SBU) The panelists pointed out Francophone insecurities as a minority group, "pure laine" or old-stock Quebecois attitudes causing isolation of immigrants, the general public's lack of knowledge of minorities, distorted views of rural Quebecers, and an irresponsible media competing to find the next alleged instance of reasonable accommodation, while paying little heed to more practical issues, such as underemployment among immigrants. Grey concluded the problem is multiculturalism, which has discouraged integration of immigrants. As the McGill Institute summarized: "Although he said he is in favor of integration, Grey noted that reasonable accommodation is a legal right under the charter and 'a refusal of reasonable accommodation is a refusal of equality a form of exclusion,' which could have a practical effect like denial of employment. Reasonable

accommodation is not about 'silly' demands like getting rid of the word Christmas or Christmas trees, he said. Real inclusion is economic. Your origin should not be a prediction of your wealth. Grey noted that he himself is an immigrant who came to Canada from Poland in 1957 at age nine." Grey, who was the lawyer advocating for the young sikh boysQ right to wear the kirpan at school, reiterated the same arguments to CG, Country PAO, and post PAO during a private conversation.

¶14. (SBU) The Quebec Council on Intercultural Relations, whose mission is to study the integration of cultural communities in the province and make policy recommendations to the Quebec government, attributes the tension over the issue of reasonable accommodation fundamentally to the simple fact that more groups are sharing the same space and bumping into each other more frequently. Ironically, however, much of the tension over the definition of reasonable accommodation has originated in places, like Herouxville (a small, rural town in Quebec whose elected council developed a "code of conduct" for immigrants--see reftel), which have few to no immigrants. According to this view, Quebec is simply catching up to other parts of the Western world on the issue, citing similar multicultural societiesQ growing pains and debates in France and the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Quebec's Catholic bishops told the media that confusion between culture and religion is what is fuelling the current debate on the way Quebecers welcome immigrants and integrate them in society, and challenged other religious groups to clearly define their identity and distinguish between strictly religious customs and cultural ones.

Liberal, PQ, and ADQ candidates chime in

¶15. (SBU) Mario Dumont, head of the political party Action Democratique du Quebec (ADQ), hit on underlying anxieties and struck a chord with Qold stockQ Quebecers, and some say simultaneously gained unprecedented popularity for his party, when he wrote an open letter to the Quebec public on reasonable accommodation in January, stating that Quebec should quit bending over backwards to accommodate minorities. Dumont cited one example of what he

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considered "unreasonable accommodation" - the exclusion of fathers-to-be from prenatal classes at one Montreal-area community center in order to accommodate the presence of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh expectant mothers (which actually turned out to be urban myth, though few have corrected the record) and challenged Quebecers to more clearly define a "frame of reference" for Quebec's values and the lengths Quebecers should go to when accommodating immigrants. One Montrealer wrote to La Presse: "We're tired of empty political shells who have no firm positionFor us, Mario Dumont is a breath of fresh air." Although Dumont's political rivals strongly dislike him, and his statements about the need to limit accommodations for immigrants have proved immensely controversial in Montreal, they have won him some support in Quebec's rural regions and among urban dwellers who fear their own rights have been encroached upon through concessions to newcomers to the province.

¶16. (SBU) Premier Charest and the Liberal party in Quebec have sought to turn down the volume on this to remind Quebecers that reasonable accommodation for religious minorities is no different in principle than accommodations for physically handicapped persons. He also noted, however, that "The Quebec nation has values, solid values, including the equality of women and men; the primacy of French; the separation between the state and religion. These values are fundamental. They cannot be the object of any accommodation. They cannot be subordinated to any other principle."

¶17. (SBU) In response to the public furor and media frenzy surrounding the code of conduct for immigrants drawn up by the elected council of the tiny town of Herouxville (see reftel), Premier Charest created a one-year commission to study reasonable accommodation in Quebec, headed by Charles Taylor, a McGill University professor emeritus of philosophy and Gerard Bouchard, an historian and sociologist. For many, the high caliber academics chosen was evidence enough that Charest recognizes the seriousness

and political importance of reasonable accommodation as an issue for Quebecers. Others, like well-respected Association for Canadian Studies Director Dr. Jack Jedwab, surmised that Charest's decision to set up the Commission was so he would not have to deal with reasonable accommodation during the electoral campaign.

¶8. (SBU) Minister of Immigration and Cultural Communities Lise Theriault made a concerted effort to explain what is, and what is not, reasonable accommodation. Minister Theriault deemed most of the high profile cases gracing press reports in recent weeks (ref A) to be "unreasonable," especially those having to do with equality between men and women, such as recent cases involving policewomen, female ER doctors and drivers' license examiners being replaced by male counterparts to accommodate the wishes of members of religious minorities, the frosting of YMCA gym windows, the practice of using only male police officers in dealing with Hasidic Jewish men, and as well as the case of a man who was asked to leave a swimming pool so Muslim women could swim (a topic treated with sympathetic humor in a recent episode of CBC TV's new sitcom, "Little Mosque on the Prairie"). When confronted during a television interview with the issue of a crucifix that still hangs in the National Assembly, (making it difficult for immigrants to truly believe religion and the state are separate in Quebec, according to the hosts), Theriault replied that the crucifix represents the 400-year history of the building of the province, a history Quebecers need not deny to welcome immigrants. Her TV program hosts pounced on this response as contradictory and shaky.

¶9. (SBU) Meanwhile, Andre Boisclair, head of the Parti Quebecois (PQ), has publicly blamed Charest for pandering to Quebecers who balk at adjustments made for immigrants and chimed in to advocate that the cross decorating the National Assembly since 1936 should be removed in the interests of removing all religious symbols from public space. Despite Quebec's identity as a "secular" province, Boisclair's suggestion proved immensely unpopular; he eventually retracted it after realizing that he had misjudged Quebecers' desire to break ranks with tradition and religious symbolism. Boisclair tried to argue that it cannot be reasonable accommodation, if it has nothing to do with public services: "In a diverse society, religious symbols have no place in public space." Issues as seemingly mundane as the composition of traditional Quebec pea soup came into play on the campaign trail, when Boisclair was asked to comment on the decision by a sugar shack owner ("cabane a sucre" or sugar shack is a Quebec institution serving foods like meat pie and baked beans during maple sugar season) to offer a special batch of pea soup without ham and pork products so that his Muslim clientele could experience this beloved Quebec tradition. Boisclair, after insisting that the State has no place getting involved with a decision by a private company to accommodate a minority request, did note that "someone who is running a cabane a sucre and is not serving ham will have a real tough time in life."

Comment

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¶10. (SBU) The political dimension of the "reasonable accommodation" debate might be attributed to political opportunism on the part of candidates who view the topic as a fickle, easily manipulated election issue. Regardless of who wins the election, the deeper tensions underlying this debate represent demographic and political trends that characterize Quebec's mosaic under pressure, and are likely to remain a hot political topic.

MARSHALL